

# Alchemical Consciousness After Descartes: Whitehead's Philosophy of Organism as Psychedelic Realism

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## An Interesting Subject for Study: The Alchemy of Knowledge

*Is there a place for psychedelics in philosophy?* This anthology assembles a variety of affirmative responses to this crucial methodological question. I first posed it to myself when I was a nineteen year old college freshman. At the time, both psychedelic experience and the history and practice of philosophy were just entering into and transforming my adolescent consciousness. It has been my experience in the fifteen years since that chemically-altered (or what I have come to call *alchemical*<sup>1</sup>) consciousness can be generative of philosophical insight. I cannot deny, for example, that my interest in Alfred North Whitehead's organic realism was first seeded by a host of molecular and vegetal teachers as well as their human proselytizers.<sup>2</sup>

The German anthropologist Nicolas Langlitz recently used the same question to frame his autoethnographic participatory research on a global network of neuroscientists studying mind-altering drugs.<sup>3</sup> Langlitz directed his anthropological attention to the work of modern laboratory scientists swept up by the recent psychedelic research renaissance in the hopes of learning how their increasing knowledge of the "turned on, tuned in"<sup>4</sup> brain influenced the way they conducted their personal lives.

Any anthropological study of the practice of psychedelic neuroscience is inevitably going to run into ontological questions. Langlitz' does not feign positivistic metaphysical neutrality when articulating the cultural insights he draws from his fieldwork. He engages directly with what

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1 See Segall (2013). "Participatory Psychodelia: Transpersonal Theory, Religious Studies, and Chemically-Altered (Alchemical) Consciousness." In *Journal of Transpersonal Research*, Vol. 5 (2), 86-94.

2 Especially Terence McKenna (who made frequent reference to Whitehead in recorded lectures and whose book *Invisible Landscape* (HarperOne, 1994) includes a chapter on organismic thought) and Alan Watts (who similarly makes frequent reference to Whitehead's organic way of thinking in recorded lectures).

3 Langlitz. (2016). "Is there a place for psychedelics in philosophy?: Fieldwork in Neuro- and Perennial Philosophy." In *Common Knowledge* 22:3. See also *Neuropsychodelia: The Revival of Hallucinogen Research Since the Decade of the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

4 I'm alluding, of course, to 1960s countercultural LSD guru Timothy Leary's famous statement, uttered to tens of thousands of young hippies at the Human Be-In in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park in 1967: "Turn on, tune in, drop out." Leary continued: "Like every great religion, we seek to find the divinity within and to express this revelation in a life of glorification and the worship of God. These ancient goals we define in the metaphor of the present—turn on, tune in, drop out." See the "American Experience" documentary on the Summer of Love (PBS and WGBH).

must be called the principle problem of all modern philosophy: consciousness.<sup>5</sup> And following Pierre Hadot, Langlitz’ approach resuscitates the ancient and medieval sense of philosophy as a way of life or “therapeutic practice—aiming at peace of mind, inner freedom, and cosmic consciousness—that would cure humankind of its anguish.”<sup>6</sup>

The epistemological quandary of David Chalmers’ so-called “hard problem”<sup>7</sup> is a symptom of what Whitehead called “the subjectivist bias” that came into fashion with Descartes. Whitehead celebrates Descartes’ discovery that “subjective experiencing is the primary metaphysical situation which is presented to metaphysics for analysis.”<sup>8</sup> “In this doctrine,” Whitehead continues, “Descartes undoubtedly made the greatest philosophical discovery since the age of Plato and Aristotle.”<sup>9</sup> But as is unpacked later, Whitehead was less excited about Descartes’ substance dualism and representationalist mode of thought. Whitehead’s organic realism accepts a *reformed* version of Descartes’ subjectivist principle, which is generalized beyond just human organisms and balanced by an objective pole. After Descartes, it is clear enough that experience, however construed, has become the *prima materia* for philosophizing, lending further support to the idea that psychedelics have an important role to play.

Of course, bashing Descartes has come to seem an obligatory part of being accepted into the club of professional neuroscientists and neurophilosophers. Strangely enough, however, Langlitz’ “closer look at [their] cultural practices reveal[ed] that the vision of Cartesian mind-body dualism is not at all foundering but is about to be fulfilled.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, despite widespread acceptance among neuroscientists of Daniel Dennett’s neurophilosophical proclamation that consciousness is merely a hallucinatory “user-illusion”<sup>11</sup> excreted by the brain, Langlitz’ ethnography revealed how the scientists themselves still went on living their lives outside the

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5 See “Consciousness as a Topic of Investigation in Western Thought” by Anderson Weekes in *Process Approaches to Consciousness* (2009), pgs. 73-135. On Weekes’ telling, “Consciousness does not appear to have been recognized in Western thought as a univocal and unitary phenomenon before the seventeenth century, when it abruptly became the all-absorbing topic of philosophy. Its status as the primary object of study virtually defined the discipline of philosophy, and a topic was ‘philosophical’ to the extent that it needed to be approached as a problem of and for consciousness” (73).

6 Langlitz (2016), 378 summarizing Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. and trans. Arnold I. Davidson (1987; repr. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 265.

7 See Chalmers. (1995). “Facing up to the Problem of Consciousness” in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2(3):200-19.

8 Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (The Free Press, 1978), 160.

9 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 159.

10 *Neuropsychedelica*, 18, 209. This despite coexisting traces of an “emergent monist discourse” and “mystic materialism.”

11 To use Daniel Dennett’s favored term. See *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017), 222.

laboratory as if they were genuine selves capable of meaningful thought and purposeful action. As Whitehead once quipped, “Scientists animated by the purpose of proving that they are purposeless constitute an interesting subject for study.”<sup>12</sup>

Cartesian dualism thus continues to be proudly dismissed by cutting edge neuroscientific theorists even while it is quietly reaffirmed in their practice of daily life. A major part of Whitehead’s response to the modern “enfeeblement of thought”<sup>13</sup> resulting from the influence of Descartes’ substance dualism is his pragmatic and radically empirical method: whatever is found in practical experience must be integrated into our metaphysical scheme. If our scientific accounts of the nature of consciousness (whether ordinary or chemically-altered) fail to include what in practice we experience and instinctually affirm, then our ontological categories are inadequate and require revision.<sup>14</sup> The value of psychedelics for philosophy is precisely that the mind-altering, boundary dissolving, world-enchanting experiences they precipitate force the issue. Consciousness reveals itself not to be an on/off switch somewhere inside the skull, but a dial with a variety of experiential modalities, each enfolding its own ontological implications. As William James famously argued, “no account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.”<sup>15</sup>

The monopolization of knowledge of reality claimed by the disembodied rational ego is forever relativized by the transformative ramifications of alchemical experience. For many of Langlitz’ neuroscientists, psychedelics inspired not spiritual transcendence but what he calls “mystic materialism” as well as a sense of awe for the complexity of the biological world.<sup>16</sup> For Aldous Huxley, who experimented with mescaline in 1953 as part of an earlier wave of psychedelic research, the experience produced not so much transcendence as the felt presence of and participation in an infinite “immanent otherness” that, though directly perceived surpassed all understanding, forcing systematic reason to humbly bow before its “unfathomable Mystery.”<sup>17</sup> To be clear, it is not that an alchemical philosophy would seek to relativize truth or reject rationality. Any admirer of Whitehead’s metaphysical scheme must admit the power of reason to

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12 *The Function of Reason* (Princeton, 1929), 9.

13 *Science and the Modern World* (The Free Press, 1967), 78.

14 *Process and Reality*, 13.

15 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (United Kingdom: Modern library, 1936), 379.

16 Langlitz, (2016). “Is there a place for psychedelics in philosophy?: Fieldwork in Neuro- and Perennial Philosophy.” *In Common Knowledge* 22:3, 381.

17 Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004), 77-79.

comprehend the universe! Rather, alchemical philosophy attempts to allow the light of the truth to refract differently into the colors and shades of each season and habitat, intelligently adapting its radiant universality to the concreteness of each local set and setting.

Before detailing the way Whitehead's process-relational reimagining of modern philosophy more adequately incorporates what is found in practical experience (whether ordinary or alchemical, inside the lab or in life), I turn to Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, reinterpreting his famous *Gedankenerfahrung* (thought-experiment) as a sort of psychedelic trip through hell and heaven and back again. My hope is that such a reading opens up a road not taken by modern natural science and philosophy, one leading away from the self-alienation and cosmic disenchantment that have so plagued contemporary science and society. Self-integration and world re-enchantment are possible. Ingested responsibly, alchemical catalysts may provide an especially powerful medicinal aid in service of this Great Work.

Descartes erected the epistemological foundation for the last several hundred years of modern techno-scientific thinking regarding external Nature and its relationship, or lack thereof, to the human mind. His idea of a disembodied rational ego set over and against a dead Nature composed of nothing but extensional lumps of matter has left an enduring mark not only on contemporary scientific epistemology and philosophy of mind but on the commonsense of most modern rational adults. Descartes' ingenious attempt to establish the necessary existence of a divine infinity subtending both finite minds and Nature has been less enduring.

As psychedelic chemistry made its way back into public consciousness during the the twentieth century, cracks in the firewall separating thinking selves from the rest of Nature (and both from their infinite divine ground) grew wider and more apparent. To draw again upon Huxley's famous example, shortly after drinking "four-tenths of a gram of mescaline dissolved in half a glass of water," he turned to a vase of flowers in his study and began to perceive

"what rose and iris and carnation so intensely signified was nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were—a transience that was yet eternal life, a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure Being, a bundle of minute, unique particulars in which, by some unspeakable and yet self-evident paradox, was to be seen the divine source of all existence."<sup>18</sup>

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18 Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 12, 18.

Huxley goes on to describe a transformed perception of reality, his mind no longer enforcing abstract spatial categories like Descartes' geometrical "extension" upon the fractal textures of the enveloping world. Instead, he found himself "perceiving in terms of intensity of existence, profundity of significance, relationships within a pattern."<sup>19</sup> As for time, Huxley's experience metamorphosed into "a perpetual present made up of one continually changing apocalypse."<sup>20</sup> Huxley came to view his ego, not as the existential foundation of all scientific knowledge, but as a rather flimsy evolutionary survival strategy, important for navigating the finite world of solid bodies but impotent in the face of the infinitely incomprehensible Great Fact of divine reality.

And yet, despite his transformed sense of self and spacetime, even the mescalinated Huxley could not in the end escape the deeply enculturated sense of mind/body dissociation.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, rather than questioning the rather epistemically tenuous and psychologically fragile nature of the skeptical ego, many modern neuroscientists interpret their own or others' chemically-altered psychedelic experiences of ecstatic dissolution of the mind/matter barrier as merely hallucinatory. Worse, researchers from the beginning of the twentieth century through to the present day (Huxley included<sup>22</sup>) have claimed that these alchemical experiences provide an "artificial model of psychosis."<sup>23</sup> Some go so far as to say that psychedelic chemicals *induce* schizophrenia.<sup>24</sup> And others, like the eliminative materialist neurophilosopher Thomas Metzinger, take the even more radical step of reducing *all* experience, whether ordinary or altered, to a neurochemically constructed hallucination.<sup>25</sup>

Alchemical modes of experience tend to be emphatically participatory and incarnational in orientation and effect, terms inspired by Whitehead that I define later. So it is no surprise that the modern rational mind, born out of and formed by the doubting and disembodied imaginations of Descartes, would pathologize them. But what if Descartes' conjuration of a deceitful demon, and

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19 Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 20.

20 Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 21.

21 Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 52.

22 Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, 54-57.

23 Beringer, K., *Der Meskalinrausch*. (1927). Seine Geschichte und Erscheinungsweise. Monographie Neurol. Psychiat. H 49. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg.

24 Paparelli, A., Di Forti, M., Morrison, P. D., & Murray, R. M. (2011). "Drug-induced psychosis: how to avoid star gazing in schizophrenia research by looking at more obvious sources of light." *Frontiers in behavioral neuroscience*, 5, 1. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2011.00001>

25 See Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003). See also Langlitz, (2016). "Is there a place for psychedelics in philosophy?: Fieldwork in Neuro- and Perennial Philosophy." *In Common Knowledge* 22:3, 377.

the ontological, psychological, and somatic alienation that has followed in its wake, is itself the paranoid hallucination? What if his doubting ego need not be our bedrock existential identity, but merely a knotted thought in need of metaphysical massage?

### **Set and Setting: Descartes on Mind, Matter, and God**

Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* inaugurated the methodological outlook of modern natural science. But in contrast to the depersonalized, objectifying techno-scientific methods of modeling Nature that he has inspired, his original meditations took the form of an intellectual autobiography. Rather than publishing his philosophy as Scholastic disputations by tediously listing opposing pro and con arguments as had remained the custom up until his day, Descartes philosophized in an entirely novel way by aiming to rely only on what he himself had experienced to be true. As Hadot would say, his philosophical meditations were more like spiritual exercises than logical arguments. "I have no business," he tells us, "except with those who are prepared to make the effort to meditate along with me and to consider the subject attentively."<sup>26</sup> His text is thus best read as an alchemical catalyst, an invitation to bracket our assumptions and follow him on a transformative journey beyond the edges of consensus reality.

Like many asketes before him, Descartes advocated social isolation and the withdrawal of the mind from the senses as preconditions for beginning the journey of discovery toward the truth. His method is a kind of soul spelunking, paradoxically affirming by inverting Plato's heliotropic allegory<sup>27</sup> by returning to the darkness of the cave, snuffing out his senses, and allowing his soul to adjust to the inner light of the eternal Idea, the infinite God-form upon which all finite things above and below will be found to depend. Descartes did not have access to a float tank like that invented by psychedelic scientist John Lilly.<sup>28</sup> Nor, for that matter, did he have access to LSD-25, psilocybin, 5-MEO-DMT, ayahuasca, or mescaline.<sup>29</sup> In Descartes' case wrapping himself in a warm winter gown and lounging in a comfortable arm chair by the fire seems to have done the trick. The set and setting of his epistemological method thus provisioned, Descartes councils us to let go of our long-held habits of thought so that we may plunge into the depths of the soul to there discover an unshakeable foundation upon which the entire edifice of scientific knowledge might be built.

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<sup>26</sup> *Meditations*. Translated by Michael Moriarty. (Oxford University Press, 2008), 101.

<sup>27</sup> See Plato's Republic, 514a–520a.

<sup>28</sup> See *Neuropsychedelia*, 216.

<sup>29</sup> Some have speculated, however, that Descartes experimented with cannabis, raising the specter of an untold psychedelic history of philosophy. See Richard Watson's *Cogito Ergo Sum: The Life of Rene Descartes* (Godine, 2007) and Frédéric Pagés' *Descartes et le Cannabis* (Mille et une nuits, 1996).

Descartes initiates his meditations by trying to induce a state of confusion and anxiety in his readers, deliberately blurring the distinction between dreaming and waking consciousness, and between madness and sanity. He gazes out the window at people walking along the street below, questioning whether the hats and coats he sees belong to actual people or are just draped over automatons. He calls all of his sensory experience and the empirical sciences (including physics, astronomy, and medicine) into doubt. He becomes uncertain of the reality of earth and sky, and even of his own body, all of which may be just dream images or hallucinations. He surmises that his rational knowledge of mathematics and logic may be more certain, but even here, his acidic incredulity forces him to admit that it is possible that the Being who designed and created his mind is merely deceiving him into believing that two plus three equals five or that squares are always four-sided.

Despite the hyperbolic skepticism exercised in his meditations, Descartes never wavers in his Catholic faith that an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God exists. He entertains atheism only hypothetically before quickly dismissing it. If no all-powerful God has created him and his mind is just the product of fate, chance, or some endless causal chain, then there would be even less reason to trust his epistemic faculties. Indeed, Descartes is only willing to give free rein to his coruscating skepticism because his belief in God assures he will not be led permanently astray. With his will securely anchored by faith in God, his intellect is free to continue down the path of doubt without risking eternal damnation. Rather than doubt the existence of God “who is perfectly good and the source of truth,” Descartes imagines instead a cunning evil demon who devotes all his effort to deceiving him:

“I will think that the sky, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things are no different from the illusions of our dreams, and that they are traps he has laid for my credulity; I will consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, and no senses, but yet as falsely believing that I have all these.”<sup>30</sup>

Descartes admits that it is difficult to maintain this attitude of absolute doubt. Long experience and familiarity have all but enslaved him to assent to the evidences of his senses and customary habits of thought. These habits weigh upon the lid of his mind’s eye. He is like a prisoner who would rather sleep and dream of freedom than awake to find himself still locked in a cell. Nonetheless, he commits to continuing the experiment by continually reminding himself that

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<sup>30</sup> *Meditations*, 16-17.

everything he experiences is uncertain and potentially delusive. Even if he cannot in this way discover any truth, at least he will avoid being deceived.

At this point, there is no turning back. The only way out is through. Descartes has plunged himself into a deep, dark epistemic whirlpool: “I can neither touch bottom with my foot nor swim back to the surface.”<sup>31</sup> A century and a half later, Kant would begin his *Critique of Pure Reason* stuck in the same web of perplexity, burdened by questions which he cannot dismiss, for they are essential to his own existence, but which he also lacks the power to answer.<sup>32</sup> Descartes, nearly drowning in doubt, flails about in search of something that the deceitful demon, Lord of Doubt, can not touch. Having already convinced himself that there is nothing at all that is certain in the world, “no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies,” Descartes becomes increasingly dizzy as he spirals into the abyss. Finally, when doubt has twisted his mind nearly to the breaking point, he realizes in a flash of insight that *he himself must exist*, for who else could be deceived? The demon “will never bring it about that I should be nothing as long as I think I am something.”<sup>33</sup> The dark power can torture my body, confuse my senses, and even delude my understanding, but *no demon could ever disavow me of myself*.

For Descartes, “I am, I exist” is not meant in this context as a mere logical proof or geometrical demonstration. He is not deducing the necessary end of a chain of reasoning about experience. He is rather announcing the free creation of an intellectual intuition. Descartes’ more commonly quoted “I think, therefore I am” does not occur in the *Meditations*. He phrases it in this more syllogistic way in other works for different audiences and purposes.<sup>34</sup> His statement in *Meditations*—“I am, I exist”—is more akin to a magical spell or spiritual incantation declaring his own existence under God.<sup>35</sup> It is an act of faith that is at the same time indubitable, functioning as an autochthonous nexus or ouroboric chiasm wherein willing and knowing, the Good and the True, coincide and cogenerate.

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31 *Meditations*, 17.

32 *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, 1998), 99.

33 *Meditations*, 18.

34 See Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method for Conducting One’s Reason Well and for Seeking Truth in the Sciences*. (United States: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 18; see also *Principles of Philosophy: Translated, with Explanatory Notes* (Miller, Valentine Rodger., Miller, R.P. Germany: Springer Netherlands, 2012), 5.

35 See Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (University of Chicago, 2017), 42. Josephson-Storm argues that Descartes’ method is “the popularization of a previously secret occult tradition.”



Descartes intends his Cogito to be taken as a finite reflection of the fact that we as human creatures are created in the image of an infinite divine Creator. That we are finite is obvious: we regularly err and are deceived. What is less obvious is that our very finitude and imperfection can be read as divine signs pointing us beyond ourselves toward infinite perfection. Descartes: “I am so constituted as a medium term between God and nothingness.”<sup>36</sup> I could not know myself in my finite existence as a thing among things unless I also had some idea of infinite perfection to compare myself with. Descartes asks: Where does this idea come from, if not from the infinite itself? Surely, I, a finite creature, could not have implanted it in myself. For I am just its pale imitation. *I am* only because *God is*. I enjoy no thought or perception that cannot be doubted except *that I am, that I exist*. Only I am adamant enough to withstand the fires of demonic doubt, because I am a flame ignited by God. Every shape or color or motion that dances before my mind’s eye can be melted like wax into the transparent idea-stuff of pure extension while I remain untouched.

Descartes’ makes his point brilliantly. It cannot be doubted that whenever I am doubting, I exist. In this act of self-realization, I partake in my finite allotment of divine power as an *imago dei*. *That* I exist is clear and distinct enough, but *what* am I, exactly? No ordinary image, surely. I am not anything extended, nothing shaped or colored or in motion through space. I am not anything sensed or imagined. Rather, for Descartes, “I am a thinking thing.”<sup>37</sup> By “thinking” Descartes means to include not only abstract reasoning, but doubting, believing, understanding, wishing, imagining, and perceiving. I am not the thing thought, but the thing that thinks. I am a thinking substance. Outside and opposed to me is the extended substance of the physical bodies around me, including my own organism. The true essence of these external bodies is not perceived by the senses, which reveal only accidental secondary qualities, but by the thinking mind alone: “what I thought I saw with my eyes, I in fact grasp only by the faculty of judging that is in my mind.”<sup>38</sup>

A charitable interpretation of his methodological discovery is that Descartes has successfully anchored scientific knowledge in his own thinking activity. But there is a good deal of epistemic sleight of hand in his maneuver, as he can just as easily be understood to have escaped the demonic whirlpool of skepticism by grabbing hold of a rope dropped from heaven. Whether anchoring in himself or accepting God’s hand, Descartes’ *Meditations* helped to inaugurate the

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<sup>36</sup> *Meditations*, 39.

<sup>37</sup> *Meditations*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> *Meditations*, 23.

modern scientific research program. Nature is to be understood as a machine obeying mathematically precise laws of motion, and the human mind is divinely pre-disposed with just the right ideas to reverse engineer it. Descartes proposes a split world of two substances united only by divine fiat. Contemporary scientific materialists and neuro-reductionists, even those of Langlitz' mystical variety, may have done away with Descartes' infinite divine substance, but they still unwittingly perform his mind/matter dualism and representationalist theory of perception. Residually Cartesian representationalist accounts of cognition inevitably lead to claims like Metzinger's that all consciousness, whether ordinary or chemically-altered, is hallucinatory. Whitehead complained nearly a century ago that "Some people express themselves as though...brains and nerves were the only real things in an entirely imaginary world."<sup>39</sup>

For Whitehead, while Descartes' experiential insights and infinite God-form are difficult to dismiss, his metaphysical dualism remains the epitome of philosophical incoherence. Descartes goes so far as to make a virtue of incoherence by defining substance as that which requires nothing but itself in order to exist. It follows that no reason can be given in the terms he provides for why the world is not simply one substance, either all mind or all matter, rather than two. In order to secure his rational epistemology, Descartes must fall back on the absurdity of an omnipotent God who arbitrarily correlates the representations of our mind to the machinations of matter. For Descartes, only God assures that our innate ideas of external Nature are true, as our sense perceptions are too fused with bodily things to be trusted. To be fair, while Whitehead is critical of Descartes' unwarranted assertion of divine power, even he cannot avoid invoking God, albeit a god of more relational and organic rather than substantial and mechanic form (I'll have more to say on Whitehead's process-relational divinity in the final section). "A recurrence to the notion of 'God' is still necessary to mediate between physical and conceptual prehensions" in Whitehead's scheme; "but not," he goes on, "in the crude form of giving a limited letter of credit to a [judgement]."<sup>40</sup> Descartes' divine insurance policy notwithstanding, his excavation of experience "obviously says something that is true" regarding our nature as thinking things; the problem is that "its notions are too abstract to penetrate into the nature of things" more generally.<sup>41</sup> Descartes' concepts of mind, matter, and God must all be re-imagined. The next section thus brings Whitehead's metaphysical scheme into conversation with Descartes' in search of a more concrete and experientially grounded account of reality, natural and divine.

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<sup>39</sup> *Science and the Modern World*, 91.

<sup>40</sup> *Process and Reality*, 49.

<sup>41</sup> *Process and Reality*, 6.

## Whitehead's Philosophy of Organism: Toward a Psychedelic Realism

If Descartes' *Meditations* were just a bad trip, the consequences of which he escaped only by recourse to a *deus ex machina*, what other avenues might be open for alchemical philosophy to re-imagine the place of consciousness in Nature? Whitehead's organic realism provides one especially promising route. In the wake of the excesses of British idealism and the complete collapse of mechanistic materialism in the early twentieth century, Whitehead sought to construct a more adequate account of the human mind's relationship to a creatively evolving cosmos.

In the first sentence of his magnum opus, *Process and Reality*, Whitehead admits that his philosophy of organism is "based upon a recurrence to that phase of philosophic thought which began with Descartes."<sup>42</sup> One way of understanding Whitehead's radically novel and so notoriously difficult categorical scheme is to read it as a thorough reconstruction of Descartes' "metaphysical machinery."<sup>43</sup> For Whitehead, metaphysics is the sustained effort to lay bare the most generic character of experiential reality. "Nothing can be omitted, experience drunk and experience sober, experience sleeping and experience waking, experience drowsy and experience wide-awake."<sup>44</sup> That which is most general in experience is that which never fails of exemplification, and for this very reason, is exceedingly difficult to notice: "It requires a very unusual mind to undertake the analysis of the obvious."<sup>45</sup> In his exegesis of the history of modern philosophy, Whitehead attends not merely to the explicit arguments of its great thinkers, but to what they take for granted as a matter of course, since it is precisely in the most innocent and commonsense phraseology that metaphysical contraband is likely to be smuggled.

In Descartes' case, while his new skeptical method and dualistic ontology represent a sharp break from the Aristotelian categories informing much of the Scholastic tradition, he nonetheless unquestioningly inherits this tradition's "subject-predicate" logic and attendant "substance-quality" ontology.<sup>46</sup> The philosophical repercussions of Descartes' substance-quality ontology are clearly illustrated by his famous examination of a piece of beeswax. After considering and then burning away its accidental sensory qualities—its honey-sweet taste, golden-white hue, and supple shape—Descartes realizes that his eyes and other senses had deceived him. None of the

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<sup>42</sup> *Process and Reality*, xi.

<sup>43</sup> *Process and Reality*, 145. Though, of course, Whitehead also combs the writings of other early modern philosophers for their scattered insights into the concrete texture of experience, especially John Locke.

<sup>44</sup> *Adventures of Ideas* (The Free Press, 1967), 226.

<sup>45</sup> *Science and the Modern World*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Whitehead's critique is directed less at Aristotle's more organic notion of substance than it is at Descartes' desiccated redeployment of it. A detailed analysis of Whitehead's relationship to Aristotle is beyond the scope of this chapter, however.

bodily modes he formerly attached to the cool wax can be understood to be essential to it, since when heated all of them vanish. He next considers whether his knowledge of the wax is a product of imagination, as he can picture it in many modes, taking many shapes, etc. But his confusion returns as he realizes his limited imagination cannot keep track of the innumerable possibilities. The only essential attribute that can clearly and distinctly be recognized to remain unchanged beneath every mode is the *extensiveness* of the wax. Extension is a geometrical magnitude, a notion that Descartes the mathematician, inventor of analytic geometry, could understand with great precision. It is attributed to the wax not by way of sight, or touch, or imagination, but by way of inferential *judgement*. The essential substance of the wax, its pure extension, is thus perceived not by the senses or imagination, but inferred by the mind alone. Descartes realizes that he does not really see the substance of the wax, only its accidental qualities, just as he does not really see people walking along the street outside his window, only hats and coats. He *judges* with his intellect rather than senses with his body that the real wax exists beneath its apparent qualities and that real people exist beneath their visible clothing.<sup>47</sup>

The first step toward understanding Whitehead's metaphysical innovations is to replace Descartes' abstract analysis of the modes and attributes of two entirely unrelated kinds of substance with a more concrete analysis of the prehensions of actual occasions of experience. Whitehead replaces Descartes' two kinds of substance with the category "actual occasion," which has its objective and subjective poles; the Cartesian notion of "quality" or "mode" is replaced by the category "prehension," which emphasizes the *mutual relatedness* of actualities rather than their substantial isolation. These Whiteheadian categories are more in concert with Descartes' great subjectivist discovery that "the enjoyment of experience [is] the constitutive subjective fact"; if experience is now at the center of philosophy, then the old substance-quality categories "have lost all claim to any fundamental character in metaphysics."<sup>48</sup> Our practical experience is intrinsically relational and purposeful: we feel we are in direct contact with a real world, and that our thoughts are effective beyond themselves.

Whitehead's philosophy is thus not one-sidedly subjective: he also has recourse to Descartes' own alternative and undeveloped theory of 'realitas objectiva,' whereby, for instance, our experience of the sun is not a private idea without intelligible connection to its astrophysical source, but the transmuted light radiating from an actual star.<sup>49</sup> On Whitehead's reading,

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<sup>47</sup> *Meditations*, 22-23.

<sup>48</sup> *Process and Reality*, 159.

<sup>49</sup> *Process and Reality*, 76.

twentieth century quantum and relativity theories forced physics to undergo a still not widely understood shift in its basic metaphysical assumptions away from the materialism of simply located particles in an empty and timeless space, thus rendering obsolete Descartes' account of externally related physical bodies or *res extensa*. Whitehead's organic realism is a protest against the modern "bifurcation of Nature" that for several centuries had enforced an incoherent division between "the nature apprehended in awareness and the nature which is the cause of awareness."<sup>50</sup> Rather than reducing our conscious perceptual experience to the status of a mere dream or hallucination that somehow floats, ghostlike, atop the conjectured reality of a mechanical Nature, Whitehead argued that "the red glow of the sunset should be as much part of nature as are the molecules and electric waves by which men of science would explain the phenomenon."<sup>51</sup> He thus replaced Descartes' inadequate dualistic ontology with an organic account of "internal relationships between actual occasions, and within actual occasions."<sup>52</sup> Whitehead explains the subjective and objective poles of actual occasions of experience in this way:

"All relatedness has its foundation in the relatedness of actualities; and such relatedness is wholly concerned with the appropriation of the dead by the living—that is to say, with 'objective immortality' whereby what is divested of its own living immediacy becomes a real component in other living immediacies of becoming. This is the doctrine that the creative advance of the world is the [subjective] becoming, the [superjective] perishing, and the objective immortalities of those things which jointly constitute *stubborn fact*."<sup>53</sup>

Whitehead's cosmos is composed of actual occasions. These occasions are holistic or atomic processes that creatively arise into subjective immediacy and perpetually perish into objective immortality. Each arises as a creative act that reincarnates the universe as one<sup>54</sup> and perishes as a "superject" contributing to the further becoming of the many. Actual occasions are composed of and relate to one another via their prehensions. Prehension replaces the mechanical concept of causality, such that each newly arising occasion is not blindly forced by but feels and responds to the influence of perished occasions in its past environment. Actual occasions thus prehensively

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<sup>50</sup> *The Concept of Nature* (Cambridge, 1920), 31.

<sup>51</sup> *The Concept of Nature*, 29.

<sup>52</sup> *Process and Reality*, 309.

<sup>53</sup> *Process and Reality*, xiii.

<sup>54</sup> *Process and Reality*, 245.

inherit and unify the experiences of the many perished occasions which precede them. What modern science had thought of as a mechanical universe obeying fixed causal laws becomes instead an organic process of growth conditioned by stubborn habits but uplifted by a principle of unrest whereby there is creative advance and emergent evolution. Prehension can also be thought of as an inverted and redistributed generalization from Descartes' notion of mental cogitation.<sup>55</sup> Rather than a pre-existing substantial subject qualified by its thoughts about an entirely alien objective world, thinking or prehension marks a rhythmic flowing or "vector" transition between objects, subjects, and "superjects." As Whitehead describes it:

"Descartes in his own philosophy conceives the thinker as creating the occasional thought. The philosophy of organism inverts the order, and conceives the thought as a constituent operation in the creation of the occasional thinker. The thinker is the final end whereby there is the thought. In this inversion we have the final contrast between a philosophy of substance and a philosophy of organism. The operations of an organism are directed towards the organism as a 'superject,' and are not directed from the organism as a 'subject.' The operations are directed from antecedent organisms and to the immediate organism. They are 'vectors,' in that they convey the many things into the constitution of the single superject. The creative process is rhythmic: it swings from the publicity of many things to the individual privacy; and it swings back from the private individual to the publicity of the objectified individual."<sup>56</sup>

Humans are not the only thinking things in an otherwise dumb cosmos. Whitehead invites us to step out of Cartesian solipsism into a panpsychic cosmogenesis wherein everything becomes a kind of thinking thing, or better, a kind of *feeling* thing.<sup>57</sup> The capacity for novel responsiveness to inherited feelings is lesser in occasions of experience associated with physical elements (their arising and perishing tends to be highly repetitive); it is greater in those associated with biological cells, and greater still in animals.

Whitehead's prehensional account of experience is meant to heal the "fatal gap" resulting from Descartes' representational epistemology, whereby the mind with its private ideas or mental symbols loses all intelligible connection with the physical actualities supposedly symbolized. We

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<sup>55</sup> *Process and Reality*, 19.

<sup>56</sup> *Process and Reality*, 150-151.

<sup>57</sup> *Process and Reality*, 41. As Whitehead notes, Descartes himself equates feeling (*sentire*) to thinking in his *Meditations* (21).

are not “solitary substances, each enjoying an illusory experience”; rather, “we find ourselves in a buzzing world, amid a democracy of fellow creatures,” reflecting the fact that experience necessarily involves “the self-enjoyment of being one among many, and of being one arising out of the composition of many.”<sup>58</sup>

### **Alchemical Consciousness as “Immersion into God”**

The history of philosophical inquiry as well as sound pedagogical practice dictate that first things are best saved for last. The notion of one occasion of experience arising out of the composition of many brings us to Whitehead’s ultimate category: Creativity. Creativity is Whitehead’s process-relational alternative to the medley of other available metaphysical ultimates peddled by modern substance-quality philosophers. Theists offer a totally transcendent God as their ultimate. Materialists prefer the pure immanence of mass or energy. In either case, the ultimate character of God or of Nature is assumed never to change. God is eternal, already perfect, completely actualized; and matter, whatever else it may turn out to be, must be determinable without remainder in terms of some definite set of mathematical formulae. The whole universe is an equation in the mind of God, if you like, the problem it represents solved in advance by His omniscience. Or, if you prefer, we are just data points in a randomly emergent multiverse running in a quantum supercomputer simulation.<sup>59</sup> In contrast to such typically modern views, wherein what we are as conscious beings is determined in advance by laws of Nature or divine decree, Whitehead’s category of Creativity invites us to re-inhabit reality as an open-ended evolutionary journey, as much a pluriverse as a universe. Creativity signals our immersion in a no longer supremely mighty but now eminently metaxic God, “the fellow-sufferer who understands”<sup>60</sup> what it is to be born and to die as a creature in a world of becoming. It is here that we can understand Whitehead’s philosophy not only as a psychedelic phenomenology (as both Lenny Gibson<sup>61</sup> and Peter Sjöstedt-H<sup>62</sup> have skillfully attempted) but as *psychedelic realism*. Whereas philosophies of the Cartesian strain imagine both God and the human mind as transcendental onlookers upon a world to which they do not really belong, Whitehead reminds us of the “dim background” in our experience “from which we derive and to which we return”:

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58 *Process and Reality*, 50, 145.

59 As the physicist Lawrence Krauss might put it. See *A Universe from Nothing: Why There is Something Rather Than Nothing* (Free Press, 2012).

60 *Process and Reality*, 351.

61 See Gibson’s unpublished paper originally presented at The Center for Process Studies in Claremont, California in August 1998, “Whitehead, LSD, and Transpersonal Psychology.” <https://www.lennygibson.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Whitehead-LSD-and-Transpersonal-Psychology-v1-1.pdf> (accessed June 3, 2020).

62 Sjöstedt-H, *Noumenautics: Metaphysics, Meta-Ethics, Psychedelics* (London: Psychedelic Press, 2015), 33-58.

“We are not enjoying a limited doll's house of clear and distinct things, secluded from all ambiguity. In the darkness beyond there ever looms the vagueness which is the universe begetting us.”<sup>63</sup>

In the Cartesian line of thinking, the entire environing world in all its concrete particularity, qualitative complexity, and aesthetic ambiguity is reduced to the uniform geometrical idea-stuff of *res extensa*. It is as though Descartes, in order to avoid drowning in doubt, found it necessary to transmute everything real between earth and sky into something ideal and thus more conceptually manageable. As the Whiteheadian philosopher Bruno Latour put it, it was for Descartes as if “the world was itself made of ‘knowability’!”<sup>64</sup> Cartesian matter, it turns out, “is the most idealist of the products of the mind.”<sup>65</sup> This is where Descartes’ “serpent of knowledge”—the “Evil Genius” by whose deceit Descartes’ was granted indubitable knowledge of himself as *res cogitans*—becomes truly dangerous, since it tempts us into a form of reasoning that equates concrete things with abstract forms: “the map resembles the territory because the territory *is* basically *already* a map!”<sup>66</sup> Descartes’ method thus reduced Nature to the human mind’s quantitative representation of it as mere extension, a geometrical grid. The values intrinsic to organic life “degenerated into a mechanism entirely valueless,” except as a source of raw material for industry.<sup>67</sup>

Whitehead’s metaphysical intervention is not merely theoretical. The viability of human life on planet earth hangs in the balance. Though his dualism has been very influential, Descartes cannot himself be blamed for the subsequent course of modern history, for the moral decay resulting from increasingly privatized minds or the ecological catastrophe resulting from the profit-driven extraction of life-value from Nature. After all, despite his insistent incredulity, Descartes never became unmoored from his Catholic faith in the infinite Creator of all finite minds and bodies. He did not foresee that many contemporary secular people, particularly the “mystic materialist” psychedelic neuroscientists studied by Langlitz, would come to view the idea of God not as a perfect and so necessarily existent Being, but as a childish fantasy projection.

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63 *Essays in Science and Philosophy* (Philosophical Library, 1948), 123.

64 Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns* (Harvard, 2013), 112.

65 Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 106.

66 Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, 113.

67 Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 195.



Descartes' idea of God was that of *necessary existence*. God is that most perfect of all ideas, so perfect as to be unblemished by the defect of failing to actually exist. Descartes reasoned that, without this divine essence or infinite God-form implanted in our souls before birth, the reality of even our own consciousness of ourselves, not to mention our bodies and the surrounding world, could be doubted indefinitely, dissolved into the smoke and shadows conjured by a demonic imagination and deceitful suite of senses. Without God's mighty "letter of credit," consciousness might be nothing but illusion, human persons nothing more than machines driven mad by the thought that they are more. Descartes argument from perfection fails, in Whitehead's view, because "it abstracts God from the historic universe" and because it neglects the evident fact that "we and our relationships are in the universe."<sup>68</sup>

For Whitehead, God is not a mere idea to be believed in or dismissed. Nor is the reality of my body and the surrounding world of other organisms a mere conjecture for a doubting ego to ponder and pass judgment upon. Indeed, the naive way in which Descartes imagines his mind's association with his body is not unrelated to the failure of his argument for God's existence. I am not merely accidentally related to my body:

"Our bodily experience is the basis of experience...our feeling of bodily-unity is a primary experience...so habitual...that we rarely mention it. No one ever says, Here am I, and I have brought my body with me."<sup>69</sup>

Nor is my body merely accidentally related to its world: my body is in fact "only a peculiarly intimate bit of the world," and its experiential functioning is the starting point for all my knowledge about that world.<sup>70</sup> Mind and body constitute a complex unity with the world, the living body functioning as a "complex amplifier" that inherits and interprets the world as a complex of feeling.<sup>71</sup> God, now incarnate in the historic universe, becomes the primary experiential fact granting the very possibility of inter- and intra-bodily orientation, the aesthetic functionality of reality, the lure latent in the nature of things that goads each ever deeper into relationship with all. I exist by virtue of God's immersion into me.<sup>72</sup> In this sense, Whitehead is in agreement with Descartes that, though we are rarely conscious of the fact outside of certain

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<sup>68</sup> *Modes of Thought* (The Free Press, 1968), 155.

<sup>69</sup> *Modes of Thought*, 156.

<sup>70</sup> *Process and Reality*, 81.

<sup>71</sup> *Process and Reality*, 119.

<sup>72</sup> Sjöstedt-H, *Noumenautics*, 50.

states of grace or without alchemical catalyzation, “the perception of God [is] prior to that of myself.”<sup>73</sup> But rather than making God the world’s solitary supreme Judge and the foundation of all scientific knowledge of a merely mechanical Nature, Whitehead invokes a more relational divinity and way of knowing amidst a “democracy of fellow creatures.” God becomes the Eros initiating each moment of experience and the Beauty shining through all of them in concert. God is the endlessly reiterating process of compositional concrescence whereby many become one and are increased by one: “The world lives by its incarnation of God in itself.”<sup>74</sup>

Just as the world gains its life through divine incarnation, Whitehead suggests that God achieves consciousness only through relationship with the finite occasions of the world. We are thus participants in the divine nature, co-creators rather than passive creations. Sjöstedt-H speculates that psychedelic experiences allow us to attain heightened awareness of this participatory reality. We do not become God so much as vector into God: “It is an apotheosis qualified by symbiosis.”<sup>75</sup> Shortly after his enmescalinated apotheosymbiosis with the infinite beauty enfolded in a vase of flowers, Huxley reflected upon how alchemically catalyzed ego dissolution grants us “an obscure knowledge that All is in all—that All is actually each.”<sup>76</sup> For Huxley, this perennial wisdom was as close as the finite mind could ever come to perceiving everything that is happening everywhere in the universe. It is akin to Whitehead’s incarnational and participatory rendering of Descartes’ notion of divine perfection, which is rooted in “our sense of value, for its own sake, of the totality of historic fact in respect to its essential unity”:

“For example, take the subtle beauty of a flower in some isolated glade of a primeval forest. No animal has ever had the subtlety of experience to enjoy its full beauty. And yet this beauty is a grand fact in the universe. When we survey nature and think however flitting and superficial has been the animal enjoyment of its wonders, and when we realize how incapable the separate cells and pulsations of each flower are of enjoying the total effect—then our sense of the value of the details for the totality dawns upon our consciousness. This is the intuition of holiness, the intuition of the sacred, which is at the foundation of all religion. In every advancing civilization this sense of sacredness has found vigorous

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73 Descartes explains the reason: “For how could I possibly understand that I doubt, and that I desire, that is, that there is something lacking in me, and that I am not completely perfect, if there were no idea in me of a more perfect being, by comparison with which I could recognize my own shortcomings?” (*Meditations*, 33).

74 *Religion in the Making* (Cambridge, 2011), 149.

75 *Noumenautics*, 51.

76 *The Doors of Perception*, 26.

expression. It tends to retire into a recessive factor in experience, as each phase of civilization enters upon its decay.”<sup>77</sup>

If our failing civilization is to flower again, it may depend upon a reinvigoration of this sense of holiness underlying our everyday consciousness. I have argued that Whitehead’s psychedelic realism has an important philosophical role to play in catalyzing such a renewal. Whitehead was not just a metaphysician, he was also an impassioned educational reformer. The knowledge economy shaping modern research universities encourages the philosophy professors and neuroscientists studying consciousness to put aside the “love of wisdom” in service of psychosomatic healing to focus instead on neutral observation and instrumental operationalization in search of military-industrial funding.<sup>78</sup> In such cultural and methodological contexts, the meaning of our own conscious existence ends up being relegated to the status of a particularly hard but rather peripheral problem awaiting a neuro-reductionist solution. The official reasons for studying consciousness are no longer existential, concerned with the meaning of life, but professional and economic, concerned with the making of money, reputation, and national defense. And so civilization enters upon its decay.

In addition to offering a novel reframing of the place of consciousness in a no longer bifurcated Nature, Whitehead critiqued the professionalized university system and put forward educational and research programs inclusive not only of specialized training in math and science, but also of “aesthetic growth” in the capacity for “intuition without an analytical divorce from the total environment.”<sup>79</sup> For philosophers like Whitehead, still attuned to wisdom’s original calling, learning can never be just the memorization of facts and figures. The aim of all human learning must be to increase our ability to appreciate “the infinite variety of vivid values achieved by an organism in its proper environment.”<sup>80</sup> The proper environment of the university is the universe. By cultivating Whitehead’s sense of relational organic value in our research, moderns might finally come to heal the metaphysical divide between mind and Nature first erected in the seventeenth century and unwittingly reproduced by contemporary neuroscience’s craniocentric theories of consciousness. Psychedelics are not a required ingredient in this pursuit, but given the proper set and setting, they may serve as potent metaphysical medicines.

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<sup>77</sup> *Modes of Thought*, 164-165.

<sup>78</sup> See Jonathan D. Moreno’s *Mind Wars: Brain Science and the Military in the 21st Century* (New York: Bellevue, 2012).

<sup>79</sup> *Science and the Modern World*, 199.

<sup>80</sup> *Science and the Modern World*, 199.